From value to vermin: a history of the donkey in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an overview of research into the history and use of donkeys in Australia. Although the role that other draught animals played in the opening up and economy of the colony has been recorded, that of the donkey has not been systematically researched before. The first three donkeys arrived in New South Wales in 1793 but they were not greatly used by Europeans to colonise the land in Eastern Australia. They came into wider use with the opening up of Central and Western Australia in the 1860s and were extensively employed until the late 1930s for freight haulage in more inhospitable areas where horse and bullock teams perished. When the motorcar finally took over, the teamsters - the men who drove the teams of donkeys - simply set their donkeys free, as they had no wish to shoot them. Conditions were ideal for the donkeys to prosper in their feral state. They are now classified as vermin and shot in the hundreds of thousands. The paper considers social, economic, environmental and ethical issues associated with the introduction and use of donkeys in Australia and identifies parallels with the more general shift in attitudes towards the Australian environment since colonisation.

Key words: Australian history, Domestic and feral animals, Transport – draught animals and their drivers, Donkeys, Victoria River District and the Kimberley, Judas Donkeys

Introduction and background

Researchers have documented the important role that draught animals, other than the donkey, have played in the exploration, settlement and early economy of Australia (eg Kennedy 1992). Indeed histories of specific draught animals, for instance, the horse (eg Ballantine 1976), bullock (eg Ruhen 1980) and camel (eg McKnight 1969), describe their particular attributes in the process of colonisation. In her article about donkeys, "Jack's Enlisted", Ernestine Hill (1943:11) stated that "in the annals of Australian exploration and colonization, we hear much of the heroism of the horse, the dogged determination of the camel. Nobody ever proposes a vote of thanks to the modest little moke (donkey)". She also observed that "nobody ever thinks of the donkey as a good Australian". Why was this so? Certainly, it would appear that they were not worthy of more than a cursory mention, at most, in the written histories of Australia. Blainey, for instance, devotes two sentences to the donkey in *The Tyranny of Distance*:

> As late as the 1930s some sheep stations in the dry Kimberley district of Western Australia employed teams of thirty or forty donkeys to carry wool to port and supplies to the station. Their donkeys, allowed to run wild when the motor lorries arrived, now number so many that they are vermin (Blainey 1966:288).

Was this scant mention evidence that donkeys did not have a significant role to play in colonial Australia? Having read several articles in donkey society magazines by "donkey enthusiasts" wishing to rectify this silence about donkeys[1], I was sure this was not the case. My purpose here, therefore, is to begin to uncover the history of donkeys in Australia and to reveal the roles they played in the settlement and economy of the country. I will also consider the valuable role played by donkeys in both WW1 and WW2, and investigate the changing relationships between donkeys and humans during the second part of the twentieth century that resulted in the latter eventually being classed as vermin. The issue of feral donkeys will be addressed, as will the attitudes in contemporary society that have caused and compounded the feral problem. Compton (2003:44) has observed that "The donkey has been not only one of the most used, but also one of the most abused animals in history". How has this come about? I argue that the history of the donkey is an important part of the complex story of human and animal relationships in Australia.

Before examining the data I have collected so far, it is necessary to provide basic terminology and to give a brief overview of the literature on donkeys. With regard to definitions, 'ass' is the correct term for the animal more commonly known in its domestic state as the donkey. The name derives from the Latin *Equus asinus*. "Donkey", a more recent and more widely used term, comes from England and is thought to derive from the dun colour and "ky" meaning small. A jack is the male of the species, while a jennet (or jenny) is the female. A mule is a cross between a male donkey (jack) and a female horse (mare), while a jennet and a stallion produce a hinny. Both mules and hinnies are usually sterile (International Museum of the Horse 1998).

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[1] For example, *Big Ears and Donkey Tales*, the magazine of the donkey society of NSW; *Brayings,* the magazine of the donkey society of Victoria; and *Donkey Digest,* the national magazine of the affiliated donkey societies of Australia.

The available literature on donkeys is not large, especially in relation to Australia. There are several books written and published in England, such as the works of Elizabeth Svendsen (1986), arguably the world's leading expert on donkeys and their care, and Robin Borwick (1981), another donkey enthusiast whose work, *The Book of the Donkey* contains a section on the Australian donkey. However, Borwick has drawn heavily on Ann Walker's *Australian Donkeys* (1973) for this section. Walker (1979, 1983) also writes elsewhere about donkeys and mules and her great love for them, sharing her extensive knowledge and expertise in caring, breeding and training them with other enthusiasts. Other books written in Australia provide similar information but for my purposes Walker's text is important because it has a chapter that attempts to trace the history of the donkey in Australia. Another major source has been *The Donkey Drivers* by Kath Burbidge (1986), a collection of oral histories gathered from teamsters, or donkey drivers, about their lives with donkeys, mainly from South Australia. There are also helpful anecdotes about donkeys in personal accounts of life in the outback, such as those by H.E. Barker (1964) and Ernestine Hill (1951).[2]

In relation to feral donkeys, scholarly articles can be found, mainly in scientific and environmental journals but also in government papers and in newspaper articles about methods of eradication. The main source of documentary evidence for the use of the donkey in colonial Australia is likely to be in the original records kept on stations and in the state libraries. Detailed references to livestock are present in the records of early settlement of the colony of New South Wales, after which sources are spasmodic. However, so far, many of the interesting sources that I have found, in the National and state libraries for instance, have been of a pictorial nature and it is quite clear from this basis that donkeys were invaluable in the harsher regions of Australia.

1788-1804 : Shadowy Beginnings

Very few donkeys were present in New South Wales through the early colonial years. The first official mention of the donkey occurred in a letter from Lieutenant Governor King to Under Secretary Nepean in 1791 when the former requested that a quantity of asses be brought from the Canary Islands (Anonymous 1892-1901). In the following year, Governor Philip made a similar request in a letter to Henry Dundas for "a few draft horses and from 15-20 asses" (Anonymous 1914-1925). There is no evidence that their requests were met. However, in February 1793, the ship *Shah Hormuzear* arrived in the colony, with "a cargo of provisions and stock" from Bengal that Captain Bampton had procured for "private speculation". On board were cattle, sheep goats, horses and six asses, three of which had died during the journey (Collins 1846). The ship was then chartered by the colonial government and a contract drawn up between the owner, William Wright Bampton, and Francis Grose, the acting Governor of New South Wales, for "one hundred large horned cattle, for the purposes of draught and breeding; and one mule and two female asses".

The first record of asses actually setting hoof in Australia appeared in an account of livestock in the colony in July, 1794: these were the three asses, two male and one female, all privately owned that had arrived by the *Shah Hormuzeur* (*HRA*, I, i, Enclosure no3:480). In the following year, Captain Bampton returned to the colony on the *Endeavour* with a cargo of grain and cattle from India (*HRA*, I, i, Paterson to Dundas:498). Amongst his cargo were "four asses", which appear on a list of livestock taken at the end of June 1795 which itemised both government stock (one male and three female asses) as well as private stock (two males and one female) (*HRA*, I, i, Enclosure no7:508.). There is also a record of four asses on Norfolk Island in June 1795 (Anonymous 1892-1901). In 1803, a letter from Governor King to Lord Hobart mentioned four asses received by the government from the ship of Messers Campbell from Calcutta. A return for government stock for 1804 records two male asses and three female (*HRA*, I, i:512). What became of these animals is unclear at this stage, as are the reasons why more were not imported at that time.

1804-1930 : Opening Up the Country

Despite these sketchy beginnings there is some evidence that, although they were not widely used in the early years of the colony at New South Wales, donkeys were beginning to appear in other areas of Australia. There are fragments of information about other imports during the early years of settlement but it appears that they were never as widely used as the horse or the bullock (Kennedy 1992:26). In 1819 a team of 16 donkeys was working with the public works department in Hobart and by 1822, donkeys were reported to be thriving in Tasmania (Kennedy 1992:25). Kennedy also recorded a time during the 1840s when the Australian Agricultural Company of New South Wales used mules in haulage from Gloucester to Liverpool Plains. A string of mules imported from Chile carried flour over the route, proving to be far more efficient than a team of bullocks, mainly because they were able to forage along the way and not become lame in the rocky terrain. A Honolulu newspaper reported the export of at least 32 donkeys and 68 mules to South Australia during late 1850s and early 1860s (Burbidge 1986: 11). She also found that Californian goldminers were said to have brought donkeys into the country (Burbidge 1986:3).

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[2] Also useful are existing studies of other draught animals, such as McKnight's *The Camel in Australia (1969)* and Kennedy's scholarly *Hauling the Loads: A History of Australia's Working Horses and Bullocks* (1992), which devotes nearly a page to the donkey. Kennedy's book is valuable in terms of references and methodology as he wrote an economic history of both draught animals, bullocks and horses. He also maintained that their importance had been overlooked in the development of colonial economies in Australia, a problem he wished to rectify. Apart from these texts, I have had to rely on donkey society magazines and web page articles written by knowledgeable donkey enthusiasts One example is Pat Emmet's (2003) account entitled "The Australian Teamster Donkey", written to communicate an appreciation of donkeys and a wish to preserve the genetic heritage of the Australian donkey.

According to established histories, it is not until the 1890s, especially in Western Australia and South Australia, that donkeys began to play an important role in opening up outback areas. They record the first donkeys to be those imported in 1866 by Sir Thomas Elder of Beltana Station in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia (eg Terry 1963: 12). Kennedy (1992: 25) argued that because of their heavy fodder requirements, an alternative to horses and bullocks was sought for draught power. Donkeys were hardy and able to survive on scrub (Kennedy 1992:26). Furthermore, Barker argued that pastoralists, concerned to run the greatest number of sheep on their stations, realised that donkeys and mules provided much less competition for fodder, as they survive on so little and do not need to be provided with feed, as horses and cattle do (Terry 1963:14). Elder and Samuel Stuckey brought camels and their Afghan handlers from Karachi to South Australia in 1864 and established a camel breeding program at Beltana. Stuckey chartered the ship *Blackwell* in Bombay to carry his assorted ark of animals to South Australia. It arrived after a month's voyage at Port Augusta in January 1866. There were 31 donkeys on board, three of which died en route. A transport company formed in 1869 operated 100 camels and 30 donkeys to carry goods from Port Augusta to Lake Hope, Elder's most northerly station. They also helped with road building through the Lake Eyre-Lake Frome region of South Australia. "Riding-donkeys were the pathfinders and donkey teams made the roads all through the great sheep region between Lake Frome and Lake Eyre" (Hill 1943: 11).

In the late nineteenth century, donkeys proved invaluable, especially in Western Australia and South Australia. Large teams of donkeys were practically the sole means of transport for goods being carried from Carnarvon to the Kimberley region in Western Australia. "Hauling huge wagons laden with stores and materials, these small, but immensely strong and hardy animals maintained an average of ten miles a day over the most difficult country" (Terry 1963:15). By 1894 there were some 131 donkeys and mules in Western Australia (Long 1988:34). In 1904 the Government of Western Australia imported donkeys from Sumatra and Mauritius (Terry 1963:15) and this is when "they began their conquest of the spinifex. Over half a million square miles they helped to build gold towns, railways and roads; to form stations all over the far outback, and bring them food supplies" (Hill 1943:12). Kennedy maintained that the donkey and mule had their greatest impact in Western Australia and that the greater use of donkeys from 1900 "was in direct response to the extension of pastoral and mining developments in the more arid regions of Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland" (Kennedy 1992:26). Long (2003:34) agreed that it was in the goldfields and Kimberley that the donkey was most useful because of its "hardiness and resistance to disease".

The Value of Donkeys

Throughout the nineteenth century, donkeys were imported into Australia as their qualities, both physiological and in terms of their temperament, became valued more widely. They were brought here because of their adaptability and ability to stand the heat and to work in harsh conditions. Donkeys can withstand a large amount of body evaporation and are versatile foragers. They are hardy, surefooted and cope well with rough tracks, extremes of weather and scant water supplies. Ernestine Hill (1943:11) noted that the donkey "is the most enduring of all beasts of burden, camel included". Donkeys have a straighter shoulder angle and a hoof more vertical than a horse, their feet are stronger and more pliable and they are able to place their feet with more precision. They have greater strength in their hind quarters than a horse and are the quickest walkers of all draught animals (Burbidge 1986:4). Many of the donkey drivers believed their donkeys were superior to horses or bullocks. This was not simply because of their obvious physiological attributes, which suited them to the remote areas so well, but also because they were faster than bullocks and had a great deal more staying power than the horse. According to some commentators, donkeys will never give up and will go on pulling until the load is moved, even when the wagon is stuck up to its axles in the sand or mud (Barker 1964; Walker 1973; Wellard 1986). Their resistance to disease was also an important factor in certain areas. In both the Kimberley and Queensland, the cattle tick reduced the viability of bullock teams. In the Kimberley, red water disease killed many bullocks and Kimberley "walkabout disease", caused by the poisonous pea-bush, had ravaged horses in the area. Donkeys were immune to both diseases (McKnight 1976:24).

While there is evidence to explain why donkeys were brought to Australia, it is more difficult to determine from whence they came. Some were imported with the intention of breeding mules as well as improving the donkey stock already here. Strong, tall animals were favoured and there are records of seven jacks being imported from Spain, which had been famous for hundreds of years for its quality horses, donkeys and mules (Walker 1973:9). Hill (1943: 11) recorded that Thomas Elder "improved the breed with grandees of exalted pedigree from Spain, and Beltana became famous for its donkey studs. They multiplied so rapidly that that they stocked the stations for well over half a century". In 1912, for example, Don Ricardo and Don Pablo, two imported Castilian jacks, were siring fine foals at Beltana Station; donkeys at that time were the only animals that could be maintained and used in the severe drought conditions (Anonymous 1965:57).

Other donkeys came from Mexico, but most came from India, particularly Rawalpindi (Walker 1973:9). Walker also stated that, in the far North "local legend has it that the great majority of donkeys were brought in from Asia" (Walker 1973:8). It has been argued that donkeys came to Southern Australia via inland routes, descendants of the earlier arrivals in eastern Australia, as well as those imported from Asia, India, Spain and Mexico (Burbidge 1986:4). It is from this rich gene pool that the large, strong Australian teamster donkey evolved.[3]

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[3] To the disappointment of many Australian donkey breeders and enthusiasts, the Australian donkey has never been recognised as a breed, "acknowledging the historical and heritage value of these fine animals – still amongst the best in the world" (Emmett 2003).

Donkeys were popular with those who drove them as they were regarded as intelligent, generally amenable by nature and quick to learn and were "considered unsurpassed in working as part of a team" (Burbidge 1986:4). Others who witnessed them at work also praised their abilities. Kay Forrest, in her account of the colonization and settlement of North West Australia, recorded that in 1908 Lapthorn and Wright, having won a twelve month contract to cart ore from Uaroo to Onslow "brought in their donkey teams, 24 to a team, mole-coloured, cream-coloured, chocolate and silver grey, gentle and patient little creatures that were easy to handle and simple to harness" (Forrest 1996). In an account of his life as a camel driver in outback Australia, H.M.Barker related how donkeys usually stayed close to a camp at night. Camels and horses had to be hobbled or they would wander off for miles during the course of the night, involving a long search the following day. Donkeys, however, chose to stay close to the camp and were always near the wagon in the morning, a quality "that saved time and money" (Barker 1964:58). Once they had been rounded up, the teamster would walk up to one donkey at a time, placing his hand on its rump. This was the signal for the donkey to move to its rightful place in the team, where it would be harnessed by the teamster. The donkey teams were driven entirely by voice. Although a whip was used, it appears mainly to have been used as a sound effect (Wellard 1986)! Another teamster tells of how his team of 30 or more donkeys used to haul the wood wagon. He said that only the lead donkey, selected for size and intelligence, had any real training. The animal was taught to respond to verbal commands and would be at the front. Other more experienced donkeys were at the back, with the inexperienced ones in the middle. By the end of the first days work, they were trained (Burbidge 1986:25). Another explains that all the donkeys had names; they were all different and known individually by the teamsters. A few would emerge as leaders and would attract a following; this was useful to the teamsters as they would call to the leaders each morning if the animals had wandered off. The leaders would come running, their followers in their wake (Burbidge 1986:11)! They also learnt quickly how to steady a wagon going downhill "With over twenty other donkeys pulling in front of them the shafters would get the idea that the wagon should be steadied and hang back in the breeching until their hind feet were skidding along the ground" (Barker 1964:179). Lamond (1961:484) recalls being told about the donkeys' tenacity and "wonderful vitality, their endurance, their ability to stand up to punishment and come up smiling where other animals would lie down and die". It is, therefore, in the personal stories and the anecdotal evidence that the true value of the donkeys in this period is revealed.

Stories of Valuable Service

Many fascinating stories are included in the oral histories of teamsters (Burbidge 1986). A few of these stories are included here. Roy Coulthard, a teamster from Kulgera Station on the Northern Territory/South Australia border, related how he took his family, furniture and belongings to the station on an old wagon pulled by a team of 25 donkeys. Once there, the animals were kept very busy carting the wool clip to the railway siding and returning with six months supplies. They were also used for carting timber that was used for building yards and sheds and, as well, for carrying stone that was required to build a house. Courtland often reflected "on the marvellous spirit of the donkeys, how they would seem to be hopelessly bogged in sand but would never fail to get moving again" (Burbidge 1986:32). Mick Place, born in Beltana in 1905, recalled many incidents with his donkey teams: one team sinking a dam were always milling around the camp in the morning, waiting to get back to work. On another occasion, six wild donkeys were harnessed up and dispersed throughout the team. They didn't play up, they simply pulled with the rest. He remembers a time when a team of 10 camels got stuck in a creek after heavy rains and a team of 30 donkeys were hooked up in front of them to pull them out (Burbidge 1986:19). Anecdotes of this nature have been repeated many times over by those who worked with donkey teams and there are some amusing reports of donkey teams pulling others out of trouble, including, ironically, bogged motorised vehicles - the ultimate cause of their demise. There is even a story of a team of wild donkeys, rounded up and used to pull a Lockhead Electra aeroplane out of the mud at Napier Downs station; the aeroplane, carrying an English family who were escaping the Japanese invasion of Singapore, had crash landed 80 kilometers north-east of Derby (Shannon 1999).

Memoirs and personal accounts reveal that teams of 20 or 30 donkeys were a common sight. They were often yoked four abreast so that they could pull heavy weights. Barker appreciated the loads the donkeys could pull "even though only a third of the size of a camel". He told of the five teams operating on the Murchison in Western Australia which pulled about seven hundred weight per donkey, "Twenty four or twenty eight donkeys could pull a loaded wagon of more that ten tons" (Barker 1964:76). In her account of life in the outback Ernestine Hill described the arrival of Burt Drew, "the Donkey King of the North" with three huge wagons emerging out of the dust. "They were drawn by a couple of hundred donkeys, spares and foals running alongside". She went on to record that "year in, year out, at three miles an hour, he carried the loading to the stations, three months out and three months back, via Victoria Downs to Wave Hill, with a branch line to Delamere and Willeroo" (Hill 1951:239). Terry (1963:15) claimed that, "probably the biggest donkey team in the colony was that of George Kinivan, of Wyndham, who used 72 donkeys to pull a huge, six-wheel dray which carried 12 tons". This brief review of the evidence available reveals its anecdotal and fragmentary nature and the need for these individual stories to be placed within a social and economic context.

1930-1945 : Value to the Nation: The Donkey and the Wars

Donkeys have been of great value and service to humankind throughout history, no more so than in times of war. They have served in both the First and the Second World Wars in vast numbers. In the East Africa Campaign of 1916-17, for instance, thousands died a terrible death from tsetse fly, others from the supposed antidote, arsenic. "Out of the 34,000 employed in the campaign, there were 1,042 alive at the end. Horses and mules died in equally appalling numbers" (Cooper 2000:201). Donkeys served with all the Allied armies in France,

> …they carried great panniers on their backs up to the front, as they were small enough to be led along the trenches; at Gallipoli they carried water cans to the front lines; in Palestine, at the end of 1917, when the supply of camels ran out, 12,790 donkey reinforcements were brought in from Egypt (Cooper 2000:201)

Although there are many books which record the contribution that horses have made to war (e.g. Ambrus 1975; Felber 2001; Hyland 1998) and even those that pay tribute to the mule's contribution (e.g. Hames 1996), once again, there is scant mention of the donkey. For Australia the exception, of course, is Simpson and his donkey - there are books, chapters, articles, paintings, sculptures, poems, stories, stamps, medallions and coins all devoted to this national icon. The centrality of Gallipoli and "the digger" to the Australian identity and the ever growing myth of Simpson and his donkey (although neither was Australian!) is discussed elsewhere.[4]

During the Second World War, both donkeys and mules were used extensively by the Allied Forces in Burma (Hames 1996). In Papua New Guinea they were used on the Kokoda Track. Here, the terrain was so rugged that no vehicle could negotiate it, so supplies were, at first, carried by backpack. It was then that the idea to bring in the sure footed donkeys and mules was conceived. Donkeys were purchased from the far northern area of South Australia, transported to Adelaide where they were trained for pack work, at the Woodside Remount Depot, before being taken on to Melbourne. For a number of reasons, detailed by Burbidge (1986: 35-37), this pack of donkeys never reached Kokoda. Another group, from the Kimberley, did reach Kokoda but their success as carriers on the Track was mixed (Lowing 1984:20). The wet and muddy conditions on the Kokoda Track were not suited to the donkey, each one carrying a pack of 100 pounds. According to Lowing, "the donkeys fared badly" (Lowing 1984:21). There is a great deal of evidence with regard to the use of donkeys and mules in both World Wars at the Australian War Museum, as well as in army documents and books about warfare. This is another rich area for research about the value of these animals and their close relationship with humans.[5]

1945- 2000 :Vermin - Feral Donkeys

> It seems a tragic reflection on Man and his sense of values that animals that were once invaluable – who played such a vital part in the opening up of this great country – should, in a generation or two, be thought of as vermin and hunted down in their thousands to be killed for the bounty paid on their ears or as pet meat (Walker 1973:10).

The donkey's journey from value to vermin in Australian history, as summarised by Walker above, has motivated the present study. Walker introduces the scale of the problem that faces both the donkeys and broader society to the present day. In rural Australia, the pastoral system and environmental factors combined to produce favourable conditions for processes of feralisation. Animals that wander freely or are left behind at mustering time learn to fend for themselves and eventually become wild. It is estimated that there are 5 million feral donkeys in Australia (Department of the Environment and Heritage 2004). The first feral donkeys were most likely to have been escapees from stations, though, in addition, many animals were left behind when teams moved on without them (McKnight 1976:22). However, it was during this time that the use of the donkey teams was declining and greater numbers were released to fend for themselves. The donkeys not only survived but were so suited to the conditions that they reproduced in large numbers. For example, McKnight was told that, in the McArthur River area of the Northern Territory, a team of 40 donkeys set loose in 1936 had bred to a number of about 1,500 within 60 years (McKnight 1976:24).

Feral donkeys are considered to be serious environmental pests, causing erosion and damaging vegetation with their hard hoofs. It is alleged that they cause pasture degradation through overgrazing, that they compete with domestic stock and are therefore unpopular with pastoralists. Donkeys are also said to damage and foul water holes and introduce weeds through seeds carried in their dung, manes and tails. In times of drought they quickly degrade areas close to remote water holes and prevent other animals from drinking from them (Department of the Environment and Heritage 2004). They are also accused of being carriers of disease and parasites which affect domestic horses. Other claims include that they break down fences and disturb cattle, sometimes causing them to stampede. A Working party on the Feral Donkey Problem in the Northern Territory reported that landholders also found that donkeys were interfering with mustering operations and costing money for control (McCool, Pollitt, Fallon, and Turner 1981:8).

The best evidence for the extent of the "problem" of feral donkeys, relates to the areas which have the greatest concentration of donkeys, both domestic and feral: the Kimberley and the adjacent area, the Victoria River District. Walkabout disease, a severe nervous disorder which resulted in aimless walking and banging into things, had greatly restricted the use of horses in both districts and donkeys were ubiquitous. In 1930 the word "pests" began to be used to describe the herds of donkeys and the first systematic destruction is believed to have taken place on the Ord River station in the Kimberley in 1936 (McDonald 1959:3).[6]

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[4] Bough, J. 2005. *The donkey (& mule) at Gallipoli.* Paper presented at 'The role of the donkey (& the mule) in the culture of the Mediterranean' conference, 7th-10th October, Island of Hydra, near Athens.

[5] Mr. White from Beltana Station was happy to oblige by selling his donkeys, which were now running wild. Near the house stood the traces, collars and hames where they had been discarded, once the donkey team had become obsolete. The donkeys were driven in; each one went to his rightful place in the team, waiting to be yoked up.

[6] It is interesting to note that since that time, some environmentalists describing the problem of feral donkeys, use terms such as "infestations" and "plagues", extremely emotive words which are obviously designed to position the reader in one way only with regard to donkeys.

The Second World War disrupted the routine of station life and it was not until after it had ended that the extent of the feral donkey situation was fully realized (McKnight 1976:24). In the Kimberley in 1949 the donkey was first declared vermin, empowering the Agricultural Protection Board of Western Australia to carry out surveys to establish their number and range and to start eradication programs (Department of Environment and Heritage 2004). Many station owners employed shooters to try to control numbers. During five months in 1955 one shooter killed 1,200 donkeys (Terry 1963:15). By1957 the population was estimated at 100,000 in the Kimberley. McKnight (1976:24) reported that shooting, trapping and poisoning were all tried and that "systematic shooting drives were the most efficient means of rapid and inexpensive destruction". He went on to report that, despite the fact that "tremendous numbers of donkeys" had been killed, in the early 1960s, feral donkeys were still talked of "in plague numbers" and that in the great slaughter undertaken in 1964-5, it was estimated that 40,000 donkeys were killed in the region, resulting in the feral population being reduced by half (McKnight 1976: 25). However, surveys would suggest that the donkeys survived these early large scale eradication programs in both the Kimberley and the Victoria River District and, indeed, continued to thrive. Terry (1963:15) reported that "Ord river station recently estimated that 10,000 donkeys were running wild in its territory". In 1964 the Western Australian government estimated that at least 100,000 roamed the eastern half of the Kimberley. In 1988, it was reported that large herds often outnumbered cattle on some stations in the Kimberley region, which carried 5000 cattle and 10,000 donkeys. From 1978-88, 164,000 were shot in the area (Vanderbeld 1988).

Although other methods, such as poisoning and trapping are sometimes resorted to, the remoteness and difficult terrain makes shooting from helicopters the most effective and practical method in the campaign to eradicate the donkey. Modern tracking technology, such as solar powered devices, is also used in the campaign to eradicate donkeys. The Judas program[7], which began in the southern Kimberley in 1994, involves several jennies being fitted with tracking device collars. These individuals then lead the shooters to the herds. A Department of Agriculture spokesman, AGWEST's Andrew Johnson explained, "Other donkeys found with the Judas donkey are then humanely culled, leaving the Judas donkey to locate and pinpoint other donkeys in the area" (Anonymous 1999). Some claim that this method has been responsible for reducing the population of feral donkeys and horses by over half a million since the 1970s. According to Johnson, the fitting of over 270 radio collars across the southern Kimberley, has meant that "we are more than half way mark for the project" (Anonymous 1999).

The Victoria River District of the Northern Territory is the other major area where donkeys were used extensively and allowed to run wild, and their story is very similar to those of the Kimberley. Control by contract shooting was begun in earnest in the 1950s, at which time it was estimated that there were some 150,000 donkeys in the district (Letts 1964: 67). No detailed records were kept of the number of animals destroyed but on the largest station Victoria River Downs, at least 30,000 were reported shot. Lewis provides insight into the way feral donkeys were dealt with in this area through his personal communications with the people involved in the culling. His photographs supply a graphic record of shot and dying donkeys (Lewis 2002:83). From 1981-84, Freeland and Choquenot reported that 83,000 donkeys were killed in the Victoria River District. However, as there was no follow up, numbers quickly returned to previous levels: "research conducted between 1986 and 1988 demonstrated that the donkey populations grow rapidly following control" (Freeland and Choquenot 1990:589). Symanski (1996:578) claimed that "a donkey population can recover from a 60 percent drop in numbers in just two or three years". The Judas program was introduced into parts of the Victoria River District in 2000 but it is too early to measure the effect. "In 2001 there were still an estimated 103,000 donkeys in the district" (Lewis 2002:85).

It is commonly assumed by European pastoralists and conservationists that feral animals should be controlled or eradicated. However, McKnight (1976:28) has argued that "only very limited studies have been made of the overgrazing issue, and these have usually exonerated the donkeys". A Senate Select Committee inquiry concluded that much more research was required. Similarly, according to the Northern Territory Government, "although the impact of feral animals is widely accepted, relatively few detailed or rigorous studies have been conducted" (Anonymous 1991a). It may be that to lay the blame on wild donkeys for so much land degradation is not entirely fair. For example, Symanski (1996:576) maintained, while discussing environmental mismanagement in Australia's far north, that "despite serious overgrazing and the loss of thousands of cattle in some years, stock numbers continued to rise" when numbers should have been reduced to "diminish grazing pressure on the land". However, he also blamed the lack of a properly organised campaign for the extermination of the feral donkeys for the ongoing problems in the area.

My research indicates that reported numbers of feral donkeys are contradictory, as is the evidence for the extent to which the donkeys are to blame for the degradation of the land. Shooting large animals from helicopters remains a contentious issue amongst some animal welfare groups as it is considered cruel and inhumane. Once an animal is labelled vermin, it is excluded from the protective laws and considerations that apply to other animals. The Feral Animal Search Conference (Canberra 1991), recommended that all methods of culling be assessed by an ethical review panel "..and if found to be unacceptable, would be prohibited under Prevention of Cruelty legislation" (Anonymous 1991b). In September 2005 a National Animal Welfare Strategy was launched by the Commonwealth government which may potentially deal with this issue.[8]

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[7] The project is 20% funded by the pastoral industry and the majority of funding by the Agricultural Protection Board.

[8] It is relevant to note that legislation relating to animal protection and culling practices is a state matter where the Commonwealth government would only ever provide guidelines.

There is a larger question regarding the historical evolution of attitudes towards the donkey and the willingness of governments and individuals to now classify and categorize these animals as vermin. The different attitudes to feral donkeys among Indigenous peoples of Australia is a case in point.[9] In general, Aboriginal people are far more accepting of an animal species that has proved its worth and lived for generations on the land. It is a European derived notion that there is somehow an environmental and biological "purity" to which we can return through the eradication of feral animals and the endorsement of only "native" species to inhabit dedicated conservation areas. Contrary to this kind of conservation ethic, Tim Low has argued that the Australian land and ecology is now hybrid and there is no going back (Low 2003). Of the numerous introduced species in Australia, those that are labeled pests, or even worse, vermin, are frequently those that dare to compete with humans - and their economic or aesthetic interests.

Conclusions

From this preliminary research, my first impressions of the lack of information about donkeys in the official history books of Australia are supported. One possible explanation is that many of the early historians of colonization and settlement were based in the eastern states and therefore overlooked the importance of the donkey to the other Australian states. I am sure a major reason for this lack of scholarly attention will prove to be the lowly status accorded to the donkey at the time of British settlement, however, the question remains as to how and why such attitudes about the animal have prevailed in the academy and beyond. There is obviously a good deal of anecdotal and pictorial evidence to support my thesis that donkeys did indeed play an important role in the opening up and early economic history of the colonies, especially in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland. The important and unique role that donkeys played had a great deal to do with their particular qualities, both physiological and in terms of their temperament. Their hardiness and adaptability meant that they could survive where other draught animals could not. We learn from those who worked closely with them of their gentle natures, the ease with which they could be trained, the willingness and tenacity with which they worked. However, the very qualities that made donkeys so suited to Australia, its harsh landscapes and hardy pioneers, are the ones that have led to their success in the feral state and, therefore, to their ultimate death penalty. The history of the donkey in Australia parallels more general shifts in attitudes towards the Australian landscape. Where initially the animals were perceived to be worthwhile for the contribution they could make to the creation of a 'productive' landscape, in more recent times the increasing value of conservation and regeneration of a 'pure' biota has prompted an equally utilitarian attitude in support of the destruction of these same animals.

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[9] See forthcoming publication by Bough, J 2006. *Reconsidering the feral donkey: preliminary historical perspectives on European and Aboriginal attitudes to asses*, in press.

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APPENDIX 1

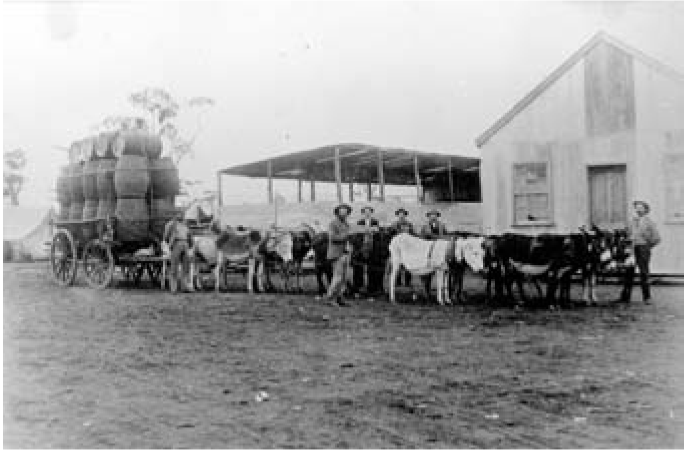

Figure 1. Beer for the Miners, arriving by Donkey Team, Kalgoorlie, 1895?. Courtesy Battye Library, 1884B/31.

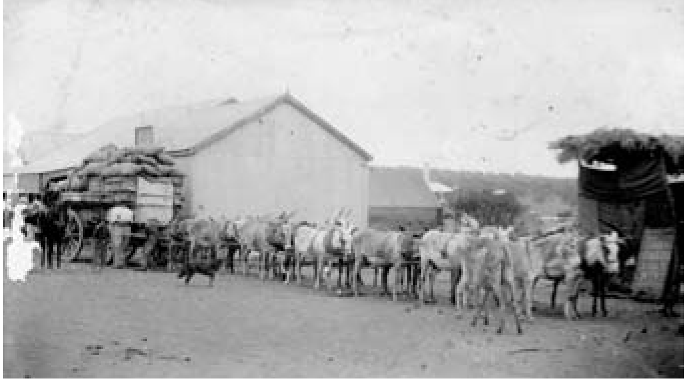

Figure 2. Donkey Team carrying produce, 1895. Courtesy Battye Library, BA1147/5

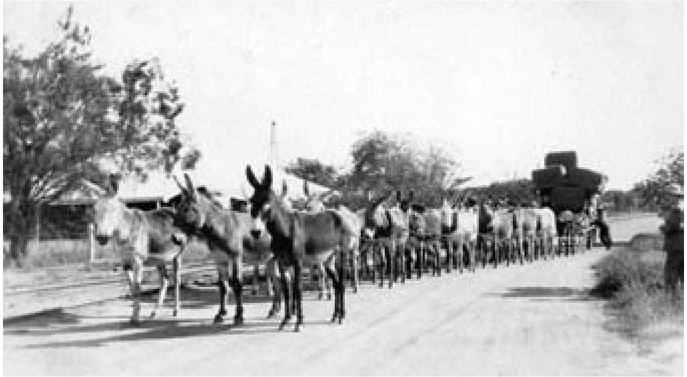

Figure 3. Donkey Team at Derby, 1939.Courtesy Battye Library, BA1322/3

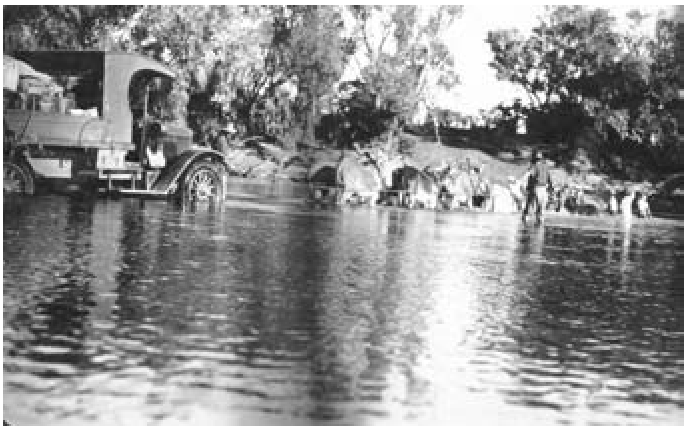

Figure 4. Donkey team pulling truck across flooded track at Fitzroy Crossing, 1939. Courtesy Battye Library, BA1322/15

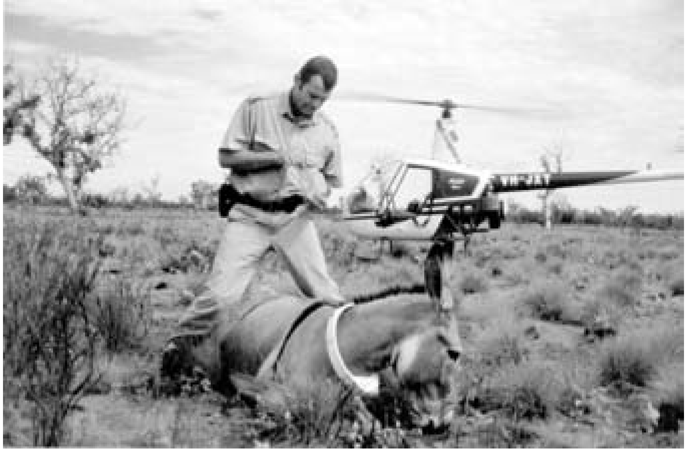

Figure 5. Mick Everett from AGWEST fits a donkey with a tracking collar. Photo: B. Maher